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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: ARAB MAGHREB UNION LABOR OFFICIALS PESSIMISTIC
ABOUT REGIONAL COOPERATION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

11. SUMMARY. (C) During a February 17 meeting, officials of the Labor Union of Arab Maghreb Workers (USTMA), the labor entity of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), expressed pessimism about the AMU's ability to revitalize itself. Officials said the recent appointment of a former Tunisian foreign minister as AMU Secretary General is unlikely to have any impact. Meanwhile, USTMA continues its limited efforts to foster regional cooperation on labor issues and seeks to encourage democratic reform in the Maghreb. The officials also lamented the weakness of civil society in the region, while noting labor groups generally have the best organization and are the most inclusive entities in the region. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) USTMA Assistant Secretary General for the Press Abdelmajid Sahraoui and Executive Director Abdelhamid Ashour told Laboff that USTMA's main goals of establishing a Maghreb Socio-Economic Council and an elected regional parliament were hampered by general AMU inaction. Noting that regional leaders had not met since 1995, despite a provision that requires annual summits, the officials said the Western Sahara issue is only part of the problem. They also stressed that the region's leaders see little benefit in regional cooperation. When asked about the likely impact of new AMU Secretary General (and former Tunisian presidential advisor

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and foreign minister) Habib Ben Yahia, Sahraoui and Ashour agreed that the appointment was honorific and not designed to improve regional cooperation.

13. (C) While general AMU weakness impacts USTMA's activities, the union is also challenged by administrative problems. Regional labor cooperation is generally positive, but the group faces difficulties collecting dues from its national labor union partners (Tunisia's UGTT, Morocco's UMT, Mauritania's UTM and Algeria's UGT). Despite this, USTMA is pursuing programs targeting women and youth, including an upcoming program with a Norwegian labor organization. Sahraoui also expressed interest in expanding cooperation with the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, which has recently opened a regional office in Algiers. (NOTE: Like Tunisia's labor movement, USTMA refuses USG funding for its activities or programs, due to members' objections to USG policies in the region. END NOTE.)

14. (C) Sahraoui and Ashour strongly criticized the weakness of Maghreb civil society, particularly the lack of independent and effective political parties. The men are both Tunisians, but they were quick to note that the situation was better in both Morocco and Algeria than

Tunisia. Ashour commented that the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) is actually weak outside of Tunis and that it is the Ministry of Interior and other state entities that ensure rural support for the GOT. Sahraoui explained that the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) is the only inclusive organization in Tunisia, as nationalists, Baathists, leftists, Islamists and even RCD party members are active in the Tunisian labor union.

15. (C) COMMENT: These comments provide another perspective on the limited capacity of the Arab Maghreb Union as a regional force. While USTMA's problems are in part specific to their non-governmental base, it is unfortunate that AMU inaction further constrains political reform in the region. This is particularly discouraging as USTMA's focus on the importance of civil society development in the region is another example of how labor can be a key partner in democratic reform efforts. END COMMENT.
HUDSON